

**"BOYS IN THE HOOD"**  
**Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son***

by Aimé J. Ellis

I

When the nineteen-year-old Richard Wright moved from Memphis to Chicago in December of 1927, he arrived to a city that had been acknowledged as a site of great economic possibility and racial refuge for many southern blacks. Indeed, Wright, like so many other young blacks, arrived in the midst of an era of massive migration from the South that saw Chicago's black population increase from 44,103 in 1910 to 109,458 in 1920 to 233,903 in 1930 (Drake and Cayton 8).<sup>1</sup> Many of these blacks left the South to escape the legal apartheid of Jim Crow life; however, it was the yearly onslaught of diminishing agricultural returns caused by drought as well as by the destructive boll weevil in the fields of the Mississippi Delta that effectively galvanized the majority of migrating blacks to embark upon the mass exodus to the North. And while many black tenant farmers and sharecroppers submitted to the idea of remaining in the South despite economic hardships, large numbers of blacks saw life in the industrializing North as a movement toward economic autonomy and political liberation. Moreover, with the brutal advent of white mob violence and extralegal lynching at the close of the nineteenth century, blacks were increasingly inclined to equate travel with freedom and to envision flight out of the South as an oppositional act of preserving their humanity.<sup>2</sup>

But life in the North for poor southern blacks during the 1920s and 1930s was a hard one and, tragically, the hope of racial justice in Chicago and other northern cities during the years of the black migration was undercut by the reality of overcrowded and dilapidated housing, joblessness, and race riots. These hostile circumstances demystified any prospect of the North as a "promised land" and ensured both class and racial division among poor immigrant blacks and city-dwelling whites. Encountering the harsh racism and segregation that would later be theorized as a type of "domestic colonization," the majority of newly arrived blacks found themselves forced into the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side or what was generally referred to as the Black Belt.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it was precisely this political context of class hostility and racial violence against newly arrived blacks that prompted the novelist Richard Wright to reflect on the personality of this emerging "black underclass."<sup>4</sup> A poor southern migrant himself, Wright was uniquely situated to capture the overwhelming fear and frustration among the black urban poor.<sup>5</sup> As the author Margaret Walker persuasively asserts in her biography of Wright's life and career:

Who else but a Mississippi boy, who had lived in rural and urban Mississippi and been wounded by the painful sting of white racism, circumscribed and constrained to a poverty-stricken black world of ignorance and superstition, who had observed the weekly Saturday night razor-cutting scrapes and the drunkenness of tortured and powerless black men killing their own and craving to kill the white man whom they blamed for their depth of degradation and racial impotence, who else but a Mississippi black boy could write with such authenticity of the tormented depths in the soul of a black youth? (148)

And like Richard Wright, many migrant blacks were outraged by America's social crime against its native sons and daughters. Unable or unwilling to return to the South or to their African homeland, they saw no viable alternative other than to stay put in Chicago and fight—to resist and to challenge, however possible, the dehumanizing racial injustices of white society.<sup>6</sup>

Describing poor urban black life during the Great Depression of the 1930s, Wright's *Native Son* (1940) depicts Chicago as a site of extreme racial and political violence. Coupled with severe economic malaise as a result of the stock market crash of 1929, conditions in the world of Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, were largely indicative of white America's racist and socially Darwinist disregard for black humanity. Indeed, as the literary historian Stephen Michael Best has argued, "One could read causally the relation between declining economic conditions and white terroristic violence, suggesting that the former increased idleness and irritability and led ultimately to the latter" (114). For many young urban blacks in northern ghettos of the 1930s, Bigger's violent rage was an understandable, if not identifiable response to American racism and poverty.

Yet many cultural critics and writers would later dispute Bigger's representational value as an accurate depiction of the collective psyche of poor urban blacks during the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in his well-known critique of Bigger Thomas in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), the writer James Baldwin argues that "a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life" (35). To a large degree, Baldwin was right.<sup>8</sup> Wright did not specifically elaborate on Bigger's relationships with other blacks or focus on the "ways in which Negroes are controlled in our society and the complex techniques they have evolved for their survival" (35).<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, whether or not Wright explicitly acknowledged the importance of Bigger's relationships with other blacks, it is my contention that Bigger was immersed within a defiantly oppositional black male subculture that not only sought to ensure his survival but also struggled to preserve his humanity. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to rethink Bigger's relationships with the other black males in *Native Son* and to explore how poor urban black males created racial community, combated social alienation in Chicago throughout the 1930s, and ultimately made sense of a world filled with racial terror.

## II

For Bigger and his friends (Gus, G. H., and Jack), Chicago's Black Belt afforded virtually no opportunities to gain access to industrial jobs or vocational training programs. Desperate to fight off hunger and feelings of despair, their daily routines consisted of raiding newsstands, fruit stands, and apartments, going to movies, hanging out at the local poolroom, or simply, "loafing around" (NS 9). A product of reform schools and the macho environment of the neighborhood poolroom, Bigger reflected the worst of "black male rage" and affirmed for many the prevalent stereotype of poor urban black males as irresponsible, savagely immoral, and inhumane. Even as Wright tells the story, Bigger was a bitter embodiment of the hatred of and injury inflicted on black people living in America's ghettos.

However unsavory Bigger's male world might have appeared, the social embraces and physical interactions that shaped the personality of his gang tell an important story concerning poor urban black male life. Surprisingly, few critics have sought to critically delve beyond what has been commonly perceived as a hypermasculine world of social despair and dysfunctional violence. Most often obscured in the critical scholarship of *Native Son*, Bigger's deeply emotional conversations with his homeboys constitute a site of black male community that allows them to purge the psychic pain of urban blight as well as symbolize an intimate space for sharing their dreams, aspirations, and joys.<sup>10</sup> In an early scene of *Native Son*, Wright depicts a private moment between Bigger and Gus:

Bigger took out his pack and gave Gus a cigarette; he lit his and held the match for Gus. They leaned their backs against the red brick wall of a building, smoking, their cigarettes slanting white across their black chins. To the east Bigger saw the sun burning a dappling yellow. In the sky above him a few white clouds drifted. He puffed silently, relaxed, his mind pleasantly vacant of purpose. Every slight movement in the street evoked a casual curiosity in him. Automatically, his eyes followed each car as it whirled over the smooth black asphalt. A woman came by and he watched the gentle sway of her body until she disappeared into a doorway. He sighed, scratched his chin and mumbled, "Kinda warm today."  
(458)

In *The Emergence of a New Black Hero* (1991), the literary critic Robert Butler suggests that this depiction of Bigger is one that "most critics fail to see because his actions violate their standard view of him as a stereotyped 'bad nigger' or victim of society" (61). Focusing on Bigger's "normal drives toward love" as he appreciates the "gentle sway" of a passing woman, Butler suggests that Bigger's desires are far more nuanced than the limited mythology of the "black male brute" permits. Moreover, Butler asserts that Bigger's calm observations and actions expose "a rare opportunity" to see Bigger as "a person who has all the usual American instincts for a life of change and possibility" (61).

Butler's attention to the often obscured or overlooked psychological depth present in the above passage, particularly Bigger's capacity to "aspire to a better life and a more fully realized self," is well taken (60). However, Butler's attempt to counter Bigger's violent determinism by pointing out his ability to adhere to "acceptable" practices of heterosexual behavior between black men and women falls considerably short of capturing Bigger's more telling cultural graces. Far from demonstrating the range of Bigger's emotional depth or his moral disposition, Butler's heteronormative appraisal of the "gentle" side of Bigger implicitly reaffirms Bigger's lack of genuine respect for either black or white women. That is, Bigger's attention to and objectification of the physical beauty of a passing woman might suggest a degree of "normalcy" in his otherwise violent persona, but it is hardly a viable indication of "Bigger's instincts for a life of change and possibility," hardly a reasonable vindication from his previously unacknowledged humanity. Ironically perhaps, it is in the wide-ranging complexity of Bigger's sometimes compassionate and sometimes bullying relationships with black men through which his humanity can be reconsidered. An unfortunate limitation, indeed, in Wright's exclusionary and male-identified articulation of racial community and collective oppositionality, it is nevertheless in Bigger's relationships with the other young black men of his neighborhood that Wright is able to address what Baldwin insists is lacking in *Native Son*: "an unspoken recognition of shared experiences" among blacks.

While Butler recognizes that "part of Bigger responds to Gus in a personal, even affectionate way," he seems to shy away from, rather than come to terms with, the persistent interplay of black male homosociality implicit in Bigger's relationship with Gus (60). Indeed, Bigger's friendship with Gus, G. H., and Jack—from the warm, intimate exchange "on the block" to the violent rituals that build "reputation" and mask fear in the neighborhood poolroom to the homoerotically suggestive masturbation incident in the movie theater—illustrates the continuity, cohesiveness, and complexity of defiantly oppositional black male cultural practices, practices that have historically functioned as a means of forging community and sustaining sanity in the midst of chronic disempowerment. For poor urban black males who regularly endured racism, police brutality, unemployment, and scrutiny from within black communities and from their own families, the social and cultural world that those poor urban black males created for themselves on the streets, in poolrooms, and even in the balconies of segregated movie theaters was a place to commiserate over and recover from the absurdity of living within a culture of terror. Indeed, these urban homosocial spaces represent sites of black male community that foster the development of black male identities against (though largely informed by) an environment of racist repression and negation.

The problem with Butler's analysis of Bigger's humanity, of course, is not simply that he fails to identify all these "homosocial spaces" in which Bigger intimately interacts with other black males. More significantly, it is Butler's own assumptions about what *constitutes* humanity—and, for Baldwin, what *constitutes* "shared experience" and community—that limit a more comprehensive understanding of Bigger's actions and behaviors. That is to say, Butler's analysis of Bigger's humanity is restricted to acts of kindness, love, generosity, and compassion. In this framework,

Bigger's humanity (i.e., his ability to express kindness and compassion toward Gus) is at best an aberration, a momentary detour from the dehumanized person that Bigger has largely become. Butler's reading of Bigger, while well intentioned in its attempt to disprove or at least complicate the stereotypical view of him as irredeemable, is ultimately flawed in two very important ways.

First it implicitly denies the possibility of interpreting Bigger's rage and frustration—the norm of Bigger's existence rather than the exception—as anything other than a mark of his despair and forced dehumanization. In effect it fails to acknowledge how Bigger's rage against exploitation, oppression, and continued injustice might be read in constructive and empowering ways (hooks 26); that is, Butler's reading fails to consider how Bigger's rage might be linked to an assertion of his humanity. This is not to suggest that Bigger's rage is always or even necessarily a sign of his humanity. However, understanding Bigger's rage as, at times, “enabling” or as a source of his agency challenges us to reconsider Bigger's humanity not simply in naively objective or positivistic terms (as Butler has done) but as an assertion of his dignity, self-worth, and “somebodiness” in a world that simultaneously dehumanizes him and renders him invisible.<sup>11</sup> It is in this sense that Bigger's humanity is inextricably tied to the pursuit of his freedom, inextricably bound up in each violent assertion of Bigger's rage.

Second, Butler fails to appreciate the full extent to which Bigger's entire life is shaped by and in struggle against a racist society. In effect he attempts to assess Bigger's humanity *in spite of* rather than as *inextricably tied to* the sociohistorical, political, and economic context that bore him. Lewis Gordon's reading of violence is particularly noteworthy here: “Violence is fundamentally a form of dehumanization; any effort to create a human place in response to violence is inevitably caught in a swirl of continued violence. This is because inhumanity—dehumanization—forces human beings into unavoidable cycles of action and reaction and dirties everyone's hands” (277). Once we complicate the meaning(s) of Bigger's rage as well as interpret Bigger's humanity in relation to his specific context, we cannot help but see Bigger as a complex embodiment of the bitter tensions that afflict poor urban black males.

But how, then, are we to account for Bigger's humanity if not by looking (as Butler has done) to Bigger's acts of kindness? How are we to make sense of his humanity given the particularly dehumanizing context in which Bigger finds himself? Are Bigger's defiantly oppositional behaviors and violence simply the internalization of a history of hate and injury that has led to an absence of his own humanity? Or might one—as was common during the era of Black Power—read Bigger's actions as nothing less than “revolutionary” in his attempt to subvert the social and political order of white supremacy and control? But what if the situation is more complicated than this? Certainly, Bigger's defiantly oppositional behaviors and practices are destructive at times, particularly his brutally raping and murdering his girlfriend, Bessie Mears, and his mistreating Gus in the poolroom. But do not Bigger's violent behaviors also constitute the very expression through which he is able to gain consciousness, restore his self-respect, and assert his humanity? How are we to account for this two-sidedness? This ambivalence between self-destruction and self-discovery? Can Bigger's behaviors somehow reflect both at once?

### "Playing White"

Let us return to Bigger's interaction with Gus as they share cigarettes and conversation on the neighborhood block. Capturing what is rarely seen from outside the world of poor urban black males, Wright exposes in this scene an array of sentiments and emotions—playfulness, joy and pleasure, rage and frustration, fear and admiration, shame—that mark the complex intimacies and defiantly oppositional practices of black male homosociality. Bigger's persistent efforts to get Gus to "play white," for example, present us with a comical though disturbing moment in the text, a moment that both appropriates and subverts the oppressive social and political norms of the dominant culture (21). Indicative of a society in which black men are "prevent[ed] from realizing their full potential as human beings and exclude[d] from full and equal participation in civil and political society," "playing white is symptomatic of an attempted racial negation (JanMohamed 286). Reenacting for themselves a world of power and control, Bigger and Gus resort to role-playing as white military leaders, as business executives, and as the president of the United States conferring with a high-level cabinet member. Gus, humoring Bigger, plays the part of the successful Wall Street investor:

"This is J. P. Morgan speaking," Gus said. "Yessuh, Mr. Morgan," Bigger said; his eyes filled with mock adulation and respect. "I want you to sell twenty thousand shares of U.S. Steel in the market this morning," Gus said. "At what price, suh?" Bigger asked. "Aw, just dump 'em at any price," Gus said with casual irritation. "We holding too much." . . . "I bet that's *just* the way they talk," Gus said. "I wouldn't be surprised," Bigger said. (NS 19)

A few passages later, Bigger—acting as the president of the United States—playfully addresses Gus as Secretary of State:

"Well, you see, the niggers is raising sand all over the country," Bigger said, struggling to keep back his laughter. "We've got to do something with these black folks. . . ." "Oh, if it's about the niggers, I'll be right there, Mr. President," Gus said. (19)

What do these comedic displays of white authority and legitimacy mean for two downtrodden black males in Chicago's Black Belt of the 1930s? What do they suggest about the ways in which political domination, economic disenfranchisement, and racial negation effectively shape the psyches of poor urban black males? What do they say about that faraway and unwelcoming place Wright refers to in *Native Son* as a "cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded" (45)? Consider Frantz Fanon's landmark study of the psychological effects of colonization on the oppressed:

The settler's world is a hostile world, which spurns the native, but at the same time it is a world of which he is envious. We have seen that the native never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler—not of becoming the settler but of substituting himself for the settler. This hostile world, ponderous and aggressive because it fends off the colonized masses with all the harshness it is capable of, represents not merely a hell from which the swiftest flight possible is desirable, but also a paradise close at hand which is guarded by terrible watchdogs. (52–53)

Inserting Bigger into Fanon's formulation as "the native [who] never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler" supplies us with a psychosocial lens for understanding how Bigger and Gus are subjects bound to repeat and mime the legitimating norms by which they have been degraded (J. Butler 131). Indeed, "play[ing] white" reflects a symbolic appropriation and "internalization" of the central attributes not simply of whiteness but of "white patriarchal power"—authority, property ownership, conquest, control—whereby Wright's native sons attempt to personify powerful white men as a means of escaping their own racial invisibility and impotence.

It is in this sense that "playing white" suggests a logic for grasping the overarching impact of white patriarchy that informs Bigger's own desperate attempt to gain agency. The cultural critic Kobena Mercer identifies this adoption of values as a process "which occurs when black men subjectively internalize and incorporate aspects of the dominant definitions of masculinity in order to contest the conditions of dependency and powerlessness which racism and racial oppression enforce" (143). Indeed, the link between white patriarchal authority and violence within Bigger's black world cannot go understated. In both a psychic and imaginative sense Bigger and Gus lose themselves in a dangerous play of white manhood that will later play out in their violently aggressive social practices in the black community.

At the same time, however, it seems necessary to appreciate how their performative skits of white male legitimacy and authority—full of sarcasm and insincerity—*unfaithfully* reenact those same legitimating norms. In effect their scrutinizing rendition of white male authority ("his eyes filled with mock adulation and respect") functions as a form of mimicry in which Bigger and Gus question, oppose, and ultimately attempt to subvert racial negation, subordination, and second-class citizenship. As Farah Griffin's reading of Bigger attests, "The closest he [Bigger] gets to holding the power of the white man is through this game, and yet inherent in the game is a critique of white people" (125). More often than not, however, these "games" reflect for Bigger and Gus both a sense of futility and racial impotence.

Nevertheless, it is from within this private and guarded space of black male homosociality that they struggle to create a sense of agency, self-worth, and meaning, a space from which they as black men attempt to carve out their own humanity. Unsatisfied by the relief that parodying white people affords, Bigger quickly becomes angry and yells out in frustration:

"But I just can't get used to it," Bigger said. "I swear to God, I can't. I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knothole in the fence." (NS 20)

Wright seems to have implicitly understood how Bigger's frustration in the above passage led to a practice of repudiation in which his inability or unwillingness to "get used to it [racial and class oppression]" illustrates the more prevalent way in which Bigger comes to assert his humanity. Thus the practice of "playing white" as a means for social critique and self-assertion is but one of several tactics employed by Bigger and his friends to combat racial terror and resist the trauma of negation and submission. Indeed other tactics or "life practices" that constitute sites of urban black male community are found in the subsequent pages of "Fear."

Take, for example, the plotting of the Blum robbery, the poolroom brawl between Gus and Bigger, as well as the masturbation incident in the theater balcony between Bigger and Jack that illustrate their collective unwillingness to abide by U.S. social decorum and order throughout the 1930s. In these defiantly oppositional practices, Bigger rejects second-class citizenship and partial assimilation into white America, finding empowerment and virtue through the embodiment of the racist sign and signifier, "nigger." In what cultural critic Abdul R. JanMohamed has called "negating the racist negation," Wright's poor urban black males—forced to conform to the negative stereotypes of a racist imagination—wear the mask of the nigger in a paradoxical move to defy the denigrating and self-effacing social and political norms prescribed to blacks during Jim Crow (299). That is to say, as Wright asserts in his own autobiography, "In what other way had the South allowed me to be natural, to be real, to be myself, except in rejection, rebellion, and aggression? (Wright, *Black Boy* 284).<sup>12</sup> Thus whereas "masquerading" as niggers clearly reaffirms the mythologizing dominant discourse of white society, it can also be understood as a kind of performance of black male identity that reflects not only a sense of defeat and degradation but also (and most importantly here) a sense of defiance and insurrection.<sup>13</sup>

### "Playing Tough"

For Bigger and his South Side Chicago cronies, Doc's poolroom afforded the daily opportunity to congregate, relax, kill time, escape the drudgery of looking for hard-to-get menial jobs and plot illegal ventures to acquire fast money.<sup>14</sup> A world unto itself, Doc's poolroom symbolized a site of black male community that stood as a testing ground for measuring one's manhood and courage in the midst of perpetual racial assault and terror. The poolroom scene in *Native Son* centers around an ambitious if not outlandish scheme: Bigger and his gang would rob Blum's delicatessen, a small neighborhood store owned and run by a Jewish man. For Bigger, Gus, and



their two running partners, G. H. and Jack, robbing Blum's represented the ultimate test of defiant oppositionality and rebellion. Wright observes,

They had always robbed Negroes. They felt that it was much easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that white policemen never really searched diligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes. For months they had talked of robbing Blum's, but had not been able to bring themselves to do it. They had the feeling that the robbing of Blum's would be a violation of ultimate taboo; it would be a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them; in short, it would be a symbolic challenge of the white world's rule over them; a challenge which they yearned to make, but were afraid to. Yes; if they could rob Blum's, it would be a real hold-up, in more senses than one. In comparison, all of their other jobs had been play. (NS 14)

That Bigger and his male friends "robbed Negroes" as a way to survive the harsh Depression era of Chicago's South Side is a clear illustration of Bigger's detachment from and disregard for black communal harmony. Yet robbing and stealing allowed Bigger and his friends to painstakingly challenge systematic black disenfranchisement as well as to "resist wage labor, pursue leisure, and demystify the work ethic myth" (Kelley 176). But their "criminal" acts would also pose other challenges to both themselves and the larger social order.

For Bigger and his friends, stealing from whites, unlike from blacks, represented a "symbolic challenge to the white world's rule over them" (NS 14).<sup>15</sup> Psychologically, the challenge of robbing a white-owned store—especially those white establishments within the Black Belt—constituted for Bigger and his friends the site of a phantasmal liberation from white domination. In effect the project of defiantly opposing the status quo of Jim Crow (i.e., robbing a white-owned store) becomes itself a male rite of passage, a passage representing the process through which Bigger and his male friends attempt to assert their humanity. In this instance, it is their ability to conquer what they fear most, to assert a sense of fearlessness and defiance that becomes tantamount to black male empowerment. Indeed, as Keith Clark rightly asserts in his critique of Wright's protest discourse, "Black manhood is achieved only by standing up to white men" (81).

What this scene suggests, however, is that fearlessness exists as a psychic ideal to which Bigger and his friends can only approximate through masking their fears and "playing tough." That this ideal involves an assertion of masculine bravado and, for Bigger, the projection of violent behavior onto his buddies problematically constitutes both hypermasculinity and fearlessness as sites of empowerment, status, and self-worth.<sup>16</sup> That is to say, fearlessness is empowering because it frees Bigger of his inferiority complex and functions to restore his self-respect. However, it is also debilitating and, indeed, destructive because it violently works to threaten communal harmony as well as to disrupt the black male community it purports to nurture. Take,

for example, Bigger's desperate exhibition of brute force over Gus when Gus exposes Bigger's fear of going through with the robbery:

"Lick it," Bigger said, his body tingling with elation. Gus's eyes filled with tears. "Lick it, I said! You think I'm playing?" Gus looked round the room without moving his head, just rolling his eyes in a mute appeal for help. But no one moved. Bigger's left fist was slowly lifting to strike. Gus's lips moved toward the knife; he stuck out his tongue and touched the blade. Gus's lips quivered and tears streamed down his cheeks. (NS 39)

In this scene Bigger violently forces Gus to "lick" his knife, a symbol of Bigger's penis. Filled with "elation" as Gus demeans himself by performing the symbolic act of fellatio on Bigger in front of his male peers, Bigger "rapes" Gus to assert his "power" over him. Here it seems crucial to call attention to the sexualized dimensionality of these homosocial practices, practices that employ both physical and sexual violence in a desperate effort to regain lost masculinity. As Mercer rightly points out in his analysis of sexualized violence among black men,

The kind of "power" acted out in the brutal violence of rape and sexual abuse is, in fact, a further expression of powerlessness, as it does nothing to challenge the underlying structure of oppression, but only "passes on" the violence of the dominant white male, via the psychic process of internalization, into the black community and onto black women [and men], hence reinforcing their oppression at the end of the chain of colonial violence. (146)

Masking their fears by playing tough is thus a kind of desperate assertion that ultimately never succeeds in freeing Bigger and his friends from psychological bondage and intraracial discord. Nevertheless, it is the assertion itself of defiant oppositionality and hypermasculinity—and the perceived need for that assertion—that becomes both the site of and occasion for grappling with their humanity; indeed, these two factors coalesce to produce the mobilizing energy around which black male community is created and sustained. Described by Cornel West as "black male bonding networks that flaunt machismo [and] promote camaraderie," the homosocial exchanges between young black males in black culture in general and in the first book of *Native Son* in particular symbolize not only a site of racial community but also function as a space for cultivating male rites of passage that solicit self-affirmation and respect (27). On the one hand, these hypermasculinist and often sexualized practices amounted to hyperbolic appropriations of white male authority within the segregated social and cultural sphere of black life during the 1930s; on the other, homosocial networks of black male community, particularly those defined within and against Jim Crow, challenged and even incited confrontation with white society as a way to both express resistance and to preserve their humanity against racial and class oppression.

Consider Wright's own autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), in which a young Richard is violently initiated into a black male homosocial network. Recalling his first day at an elementary school in Mississippi, Wright asserts, "This was my test. If I failed now, I would have failed at school, for the first trial came not in books, but in how one's fellows took one, what value they placed upon one's willingness to fight" (91). For Richard and his peers, this was a crucial "test" of black masculinity that reflected the struggle of asserting "somebodiness" in a world in which they had little or no control. Indeed, this expression of rebellious adolescence constituted a site of agency for doing battle not only with each other but also with an alien and brutal white world. For many young black males growing up in Jim Crow, strength and toughness was a social necessity that reflected both the past and impending brutalities of racial terror. And as was the case with Richard, animosity toward white racism provided the foundational "touchstone of fraternity" among black males, carrying with it a vengeful pride in their bodies and defiantly oppositional attitudes (Wright, *Black Boy* 78). Of his early days hanging out with the other black boys, Richard writes:

We had somehow caught the spirit of the role of our sex and we flocked together for common moral schooling. We spoke boastfully in bass voices; we used the word "nigger" to prove the tough fiber of our feelings; we spouted excessive profanity as a sign of our coming manhood. (78)

It would be detrimental, however, to view their tough facades and "cool poses"—much like the adolescent posturing of Bigger and his male partners in the poolroom—as uniformly "sociopathic behavior . . . foster[ing] black men's estrangement" (Clark 24). Indeed, the "spirit" with which young black males fought to prove their "coming manhood" was as much a dysfunctional response to racial terror as it was a humanizing practice of selfhood and intimate initiation into black male community. Emerging from a historic legacy of political, social, and physical emasculation dating back to black men's enslavement and continuing into the twentieth century, young black males saw little means or viable reason for thinking differently about gender, empowerment, and racial retribution. And this is crucially important to remember in making sense of the ways in which black men came to understand—both psychically and physically—their chances of survival in an overtly racist society. Not surprisingly many black men not only valued their tough facades and cool poses as proud badges of courage but saw them as a testament to their physical superiority as well as an expression of their resolve to defy white supremacy.<sup>17</sup>

This is not at all to suggest that playing tough—a social practice replete with misogyny and, often, intraracial discord—should be understood as a site of subversion. To the contrary, these violent rituals of black manhood reveal a certain participation in and reiteration of dominant norms, norms that function ultimately to "police" and "contain" black male identity. Indeed, there is little if anything to recuperate from Bigger's maltreatment of Gus in the poolroom. In the end, "playing tough" is not an exemplar of radical subversion. Yet, it does demonstrate the ambivalence in which young black males attempt to forge through hegemonic spaces, spaces

that, as Judith Butler reminds us, "reflect the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes" (125). However, as much as there is an aggressively masculine anxiety leading to disharmony within his group, there is also the "creation of kinship" and the building of community that cannot be overlooked.

### "Playing with Themselves"

Part of what makes Bigger and his male world hard to redeem is their blatant disregard for social decorum and decency. Among themselves, they hedonistically and often recklessly indulge in their bodies as a means of recovering from what they believe to be the constant negation of their humanity by white society. Indeed, in a downtown movie theater balcony, Bigger and Jack take great pleasure in masturbating and expelling their bodily fluids onto the floor, competing with each other in a phallic exercise of sexual angst and expedience. Capturing in graphic detail their adolescent shenanigans, Wright leaves little to the imagination:

"You at it again?" Jack said. "I'm polishing my nightstick," Bigger said. They giggled. "I'll beat you," Jack said. "Go to hell." The organ played for a long moment on a single note, then died away. "I'll bet you ain't even hard yet," Jack whispered. "I'm getting hard." "Mine's like a rod," Jack said with intense pride. "I wish I had Bessie here now," Bigger said. "I could make old Clara moan now." They sighed. . . . Bigger saw Jack lean forward and stretch out his legs, rigidly. "You gone?" "Yee-eeah . . ." "You pull off fast . . ." Again they were silent. Then Bigger leaned forward, breathing hard. "I'm gone . . . God . . . damn . . ." They sat still for five minutes, slumped down in their seats. Finally, they straightened. "I don't know where to put my feet now," Bigger said, laughing. "Let's take another seat." (30)

Critics who assert that this scene reflects a shameful display of lewd behavior fail, I believe, to come to terms with the spatial constraints and broader social politics operating within the dehumanizing quarters of Chicago's South Side. First, for many poor urban black families "packed" into the Black Belt, "home" amounted to a one-room kitchenette in which several families were forced to share a single bathroom.<sup>18</sup> Reflected in the opening scene of *Native Son*, Wright gives his readers a glimpse of the tight confines of the Thomas "household": Bigger, Buddy (younger brother), Vera (younger sister), and Mrs. Thomas (mother) are all waking abruptly to the sound of an alarm clock—Bigger and Buddy sharing one bed, and Vera and Mrs. Thomas another. Wright exposes how, constrained by the lack of privacy, "the two boys kept their faces averted while their mother and sister put on enough clothes to keep from feeling ashamed; and the mother and sister did the same while the boys dress (NS 4).

Challenging conventional ideas about home as a site of comfort, intimacy, and emotional support, Bigger's view of domestic space is one of unease, stress, anxiety,

confinement, docility, and psychic despair. And not unlike many poor urban black males then and now, Bigger finds solace in the "streets," where he is temporarily free from patriarchal-familial responsibility and the emasculating torment and pressure of his mother. Recall the harsh words she directs toward him at the breakfast table: "Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you," and "Honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life" (8-9). Not surprisingly, Bigger finds comfort with the other young black males of his neighborhood as they seek out what Robin Kelley refers to as "spaces of leisure." Indeed, the spacious movie theater, much like the street corner and the poolroom, not only provides respite from the suffocating confines of the tenement but also facilitates a kind of psychic escape into a world of fantasy and sexual gratification.

What would it mean, then, to consider their masturbatory act as something other than "obnoxious sexual perversions"?<sup>19</sup> Is it possible to see their sexual behavior in the movie theater as liberating or strangely—forgive the pun—uplifting? But here it seems that I am obliged to point out that there is no necessary relation between their sexual act and political subversion; indeed, there is little evidence in this scene to suggest that Bigger and Jack are at all conscious of their participation in anything subversive. However, the social context in which these two boys found themselves may have reflected how the act of masturbation in a public space could be interpreted as defiantly oppositional, throwing caution to the wind within a coercive context of racial obeisance. Hanging out, avoiding the daily grind of looking for menial jobs, and seeking pleasure—in all, refusing to be "good citizens"—symbolized a defiant repudiation of societal expectations; in a world where white society only permitted them limited and unequal access, Bigger and Jack, as was the case with many young black males in urban America, responded with disdain and impunity.

Their masturbatory act, reflecting defiance against social decorum and the status quo, reveals yet another way in which we might be able to make sense of how Bigger and Jack attempt to liberate themselves from white control. How can we move to a consideration of their participation in the masturbatory act as an expression of their sexuality and, by that virtue, an expression of their humanity? Inextricably connected to a culture that appears to emasculate, maim, and desexualize, and in every conceivable way castrate black male subjectivity, masturbation can be interpreted not only as an oppositional gesture but also as a "humanizing" practice that may not be deemed as altogether subversive but that nonetheless can be understood as an enabling assertion of the self. And critics who have referred to his masturbation as yet another example of racial impotence fail, I believe, to make this connection.

Yet despite Wright's efforts to shed light on the tortured psyches of poor urban black males under the reign of racial terror, he ultimately fails to elaborate on the sexualized dimensionality of black male identity in general and of their homosocial practices in particular. And this omission is perhaps done for good reason: focus on Bigger's sexuality would inevitably distract from Wright's central thesis that Bigger's violent behavior is a product of rage and not sexual passion. Moreover, the political and social climate of the 1940s demanded a certain sensitivity toward America's most volatile sexual taboos—racial amalgamation and the myths surrounding black male sexuality. As Keneth Kinnamon points out in his study of *Native Son*:

Having dropped the original ending of the novel, Wright omits from the galley's passages about "life, new and strange" and passages invoking fire imagery: "Bigger Thomas is part of a furious blaze of liquid life energy which once blazed and is still blazing in our land. He is a hot jet of life that spattered itself in futility against a cold wall." Here Wright may have been uneasy with the orgasmic hyperbole of such a metaphor. Certainly other cuts de-emphasize Bigger's sexuality [*my emphasis*], such as the deletion of a reference to masturbation as a trope for Bigger's entire life. In Buckley's speech, too, Wright cuts a reference to the Florida newsreel and "the obnoxious sexual perversions practiced by these boys [Bigger and Jack] in darkened theatres." (122)

While Wright makes a seemingly conscious decision to "de-emphasize Bigger's sexuality," he is nonetheless unable to altogether avoid leaving traces of the sexual dynamics and masculine anxieties that inform the practices of Bigger and his male friends. Indeed, the masturbatory act in the theater—as well as Bigger's violently sexual assertion of force over Gus in the poolroom—may very well reflect what Maurice Wallace refers to as the "castration fixation haunting (largely heterosexual) black male self-identity" whereby "modern manhood [is] an endless rivalry for the power and privileges of patriarchy animated by the psychic discomfiture of men's mutual fears and desires for one another, often in sexually charged contexts" (39, 1).<sup>20</sup> To be sure, this "psychic discomfiture of [black] men's fears and desires for one another" is suggestive of the multiple ways in which the "homosocial" is not only tied to sexuality but inextricably caught up with the "homosexual."<sup>21</sup>

But what more do these phallic anxieties reveal about the bonds created and sustained between black males? Indeed, while these masculine anxieties and sexual dynamics operate at the core of black male community and often manifest in destructive behaviors, they are also simultaneously a part of a broader homosocial network of enabling, nurturing, and self-affirming practices that allow black males a space to heal, take stock, identify with, and—without becoming overly sentimental—love one another. Here, again, the claim of homoerotic attachments among black males is duly noted: it would not be far-fetched to view Bigger's homoerotic attachments to other black males in the novel as holding an equally powerful place as his erotic attachments to women. Thus, even as Bigger references his girlfriend while masturbating beside Jack ("I wish I had Bessie here now"), readers are able to discern the discursive possibilities of homoerotic desire looming in Wright's imaginative closet.

However, drawing attention to these intimate spaces—both physical and emotional—that black males share illuminates, I believe, the deep bonds that have kept black males with the fortitude and perseverance to withstand the insanity that racial terror and economic disadvantage produce. For example, in Bigger's interactions with his younger brother, Buddy, one can witness the "unspoken love" in Buddy's plea to their mother—"Lay off, Ma" (11)—in an attempt to shield Bigger from her nagging remarks. Equally protective of and concerned for Buddy, "He [Bigger] did not mind what his mother said to Buddy about him. Buddy was alright. Tough, plenty" (15). A rare instance of their mutual affection, it points to how these "black male bonding

networks" operate, encapsulating a number of the significant features in Wright's conception of black male community. And yet Bigger's affectionate gestures toward Buddy, Gus, and Jack reveal only part of the empowering significance of black male homosociality. Indeed, we must also examine the other—albeit less palatable—expressions of their defiantly oppositional behaviors, for in them lies important evidence of their desires to be recognized, acknowledged and, ultimately, respected.

What Bigger's relationships with the other black males in *Native Son* show us is the complex (and most often subtle) dynamics of black male homosociality operating at once to reinforce and resist the annihilating aims of white authority. Scholars, religious and political leaders, and journalists who continue to see black male homosociality, particularly the defiantly oppositional behaviors of poor urban black males, as uniformly nihilistic, or who see them as inherently aberrant manifestations of "black maleness," or who argue compassionately for their "behavioral reprogramming," need to examine poor urban black male life in relation to the broader social, economic, and political contexts of U.S. society. Once we delve beyond the "cool poses" and hypermasculine posturing to explore how their social and political values are shaped and, indeed, tied to the overarching ideological structure of the dominant society, we can begin to grasp that psychic space in which poor urban black males make sense of the absurdity and dehumanizing practices of racial subjugation.

Thus, whether it is "playing white" on the street corner, "playing tough" in the neighborhood poolroom, or just "playing around" in the movie theater balcony, it is difficult to deny the sense of self (somebodiness), relief (pleasure), and even "power" (control) many poor urban black males feel as they assert themselves within and against a culture of racial terror. In this regard, their defiantly oppositional behaviors suggest an ethical ambivalence between "right" and "wrong" that cannot be so readily separated.

Whatever cultural critics might make of the misogyny, homophobia, hypermasculinity, and violence that persist in many poor urban black male communities, black people, particularly those who closely identify with hip-hop culture and rap music, are not inclined to wholly dismiss these "ruffnecks" or "bad brothas." Take, for example, MC Lyte's 1987 "Ruffneck" or, more recently, Angie Stone's 2000 "Brotha" in which black women voice their "love" and understanding for these "boys in the 'hood." In her attempt to redeem black males from the litany of racial stereotypes, Philadelphia Soul Sister Stone proudly asserts: "He's misunderstood, / some say that he's up to no good around the neighborhood." In a very real sense, Wright's Bigger Thomas is representative of those black males Stone refers to as "your down for whatever chillin' on the corner, brotha," brothers who are "facin' doubt" and desperately trying to "work it out."<sup>22</sup> But "work[ing] it out" is often a messy affair in which there are rarely definitive routes, rarely clear paths to "righteousness" for the dispossessed. In fact, for poor urban black males, responding to racial terror (and thus dehumanization) is taking part in what Lewis Gordon refers to as an "unavoidable cycle of action and reaction [that] dirties everyone's hands" (277). This realization is crucial as we attempt to grapple with the plight of poor urban black youths in contemporary U.S. society. For as we push forward into a new millennium there are more—not fewer—Bigger Thomases who are becoming less and less afraid to assert themselves even in the face of prison or death.

## NOTES

1. According to Drake and Cayton, Chicago's other populations, "native white" and "foreign-born white and other races," increased from 1,357,840 and 783,340 in 1910 to 1,783,687 and 808,560 in 1920 to 2,275,674 and 866,861 in 1930.
2. Despite the intolerable treatment of blacks in the South, accommodationist black political leader, Booker T. Washington, adamantly warned against blacks' migrating to the North and upsetting the social and political order of American society. Also, see Ida B. Wells's *On Lynchings* (1892) and Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984). Wells compiles one of the most complete records of racial violence and lynchings. The long history of blacks being lynched in the South begins during the 1870s but continues to a significant degree well into the first quarter of the twentieth century.
3. The "Black Belt" refers to the section of Chicago in which an overwhelming proportion (90 percent) of the black community lived and, through circumstance and segregation, were forced to remain. Increasingly, the Black Belt became more concentrated as more and more blacks moved into Chicago. Drake and Cayton wrote, "By 1940, this area of Chicago had virtually ceased to expand in size, but new migrants to the city were pouring into it, and very few Negroes were trickling out into other parts of the city" (Drake and Cayton 1945: 174). The term, "Black Belt," also refers to what W. E. B. DuBois describes in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as the geographical "centre of those nine million men who are America's dark heritage from slavery and the slave-trade." DuBois maps the Black Belt, located in the heart of Georgia, as "two hundred miles south of Atlanta, two hundred miles west of the Atlantic, and one hundred miles north of the Great Gulf [where] lies Dougherty County, with ten thousand Negroes and two thousand whites." See the sections titled, "Of the Black Belt" and "Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece" for an elaboration on the southern Black Belt. Also, see Charles S. Johnson's *Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South* (1941).
4. The "black underclass" was a phrase coined by William Julius Wilson in *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) to describe the black urban poor. While Wilson's definition has been widely used and generally accepted by social scientists, it is a definition with several faulty premises. Among them is that implicit in his understanding of the black underclass is the presumption of a "deficient" culture or a "culture of poverty" that has emerged in the face of economic adversity.
5. According to Edward Margolies in *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Writers* (1968), Wright was "born the son of a tenant farmer outside of Natchez in September, 1908. When he was six, his father abandoned his family and his mother was left in sole charge of Richard and his younger brother." Asserting his familiarity with southern black folk traditions, Wright comments in *White Man Listen!* (1957), "Because I feel personally identified with the migrant Negro, his folk songs, his ditties, his wild tales of bad men; and because my own life was forged in the depths in which they live, I'll tell first of them" (Wright 85-86).
6. In LeRoi Jones's *Blues People*, he writes, "The Garvey Movement, even though ill-fated, enjoyed a great deal of popularity among poorer Negroes, and it is important to realize that even at the time of World War I and the years directly following, the Negro masses had not moved so far into the mainstream of American life that they could forget there was an Africa out of which their forebears had been taken and to which they themselves might yet have to return" (114).
7. In Alain Locke's 1941 review of *Native Son*, he raises this very question of representativeness: "What about Bigger? Is he typical, or as some hotly contest, misrepresentative?" (19).
8. Wright has this to say about Bigger's detachment from other blacks, "I had also to show what oppression had done to Bigger's relationships with his own people, how it had split him off from them, how it had baffled him; how oppression seems to hinder and stifle in the victim those very qualities of character that are so essential for an effective struggle against the oppressor" (Wright 38).
9. In his recent study of black masculinity, *Black Manhood* (2002), Keith Clark reiterates Baldwin's critique: "Echoing Ellison, he [Baldwin] castigated masculinist protest and its archetypal document, *Native Son*, for effacing the 'humanity' of black people" (66).
10. In *Who's Set You Flowin'* (1995), Farah Jasmine Griffin also points to the construction of urban black male spaces or, as she calls them, "the street culture space of men" (110). However, her reading emphasizes a troubled world in which "male protagonists give up any hope of dreaming and seek instead to carve out some degree of manhood in a male-defined street



- culture and its accompanying spaces" (110). Keith Clark too condemns Wright's "street-identified" black male community in *Native Son* as "debased" and "reiterates how Bigger's combustible relationships with other black men become nothing more than testosterone-sodden competitions in which he defines himself by standards of patriarchal masculinity" (24).
11. Positivism, as an epistemological method, suggests that one's humanity can be measured by "observable facts"; accordingly, this approach to knowledge fails to address what Raymond Williams points to in *Keywords* (1983) as a neglect of "experiences and questions which are not 'measurable' in this way" (239). Does Butler "neglect experiences and questions which are not 'measurable'" according to 'observable facts' such as compassionate behavior, kind acts, etc.?
  12. Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), 284. Here I am borrowing from Abdul R. JanMohamed's insightful essay, "Negating the Negation: The Construction of Richard Wright," in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, New York: Amistad, 1993, 285–301. JanMohamed adds, "Wright's strategy requires that such stereotypes not be denied through simple negation but rather that they be exploded through a demonstration of how racist society forces blacks to conform to these stereotypes" (5n, 301).
  13. I am borrowing here from Judith Butler's analysis of gender performativity in *Bodies That Matter*.
  14. The unlikely prospect of landing menial jobs was often referred to as a situation in which blacks were "forced to 'only stand and wait' at relief stations, on street corners, in poolrooms and taverns, in policy stations and churches, for opportunities that never came and for the work which eluded both them and their white fellow-hoppers" (Cayton and Drake 523).
  15. Wright's reference to antagonist black-Jewish relations in *Native Son* is supported by the violent anti-Semitic campaign of 1938. According to Horace Cayton, Jr., and St. Clair Drake in *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), "The inhabitants of the Black Ghetto grow restless in their frustration, penned in, isolated, overcrowded. During a depression or a war (the periods covered by this account), the consciousness of their exclusion and subordination is tremendously heightened. Within this spatial and social framework morale tends to be low and tempers taut. Anti-Semitic sentiments are latent" (213).
  16. bell hooks writes in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995): "Within black life, as well as in mainstream society, males prove they are 'men' by the exhibition of antisocial behavior, lack of consideration for the needs of others, refusal to communicate, unwillingness to show nurturance and care. Here I am not speaking about traits adult males cultivate, I am talking about the traits little boys learn early in life to associate with manhood and act out" (74).
  17. In her recent essay, "This Disease Called Strength," Trudier Harris describes the historical legacy of black men's psychic internalization of physical strength. She writes, "Many black men, who have been taught to rely on their bodies more than anything else, have simultaneously been taught—through history, popular culture, and their own communities—that their bodies are physically superior to those of the frail, 'puny' white men who enslaved them. This superior physical strength therefore enables them to endure—and withstand—extreme physical duress. They can carry more weight (think of black men's historical work on levees or in cotton fields or other physically demanding situations), fight harder (boxing, physical contests during slavery), run longer (escape from slavery), jump higher (sports), and withstand more (war, prison)—or so they believe . . . and die in a culturally defined drama that will value how they are 'laid to rest' just as enthusiastically as they valued the strength that led to their deaths" (38). An extension of Harris's thesis can be correlated to young urban black men in prisons (i.e., prisons as a rite of passage to black manhood). See *Prison Masculinities*.
  18. See *Black Metropolis* by Drake and Cayton for an elaborate discussion of housing segregation in Chicago's Black Belt.
  19. Here I am making reference to Keneth Kinnamon's research that points to Wright's omission in his galley proofs of Bigger's sexuality.
  20. Here Maurice Wallace is drawing from Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), in which she asserts an inextricable relation between "homosocial" and "homosexual." Indeed, Sedgwick makes the claim that the "homosocial" is unavoidably bound or caught up in the "orbit of desire" associated with the "dreaded" site of homosexuality.
  21. Several recent studies by Maurice Wallace, Keith Clark, and Antiwan Walker have paid attention to the sexual dynamics operating in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Indeed it seems quite plausible to see Bigger's reference to Bessie in the theater ("I wish I had Bessie here now")

- as a thinly veiled "masking" of his homoerotic attachment to Jack. Furthermore, Margaret Walker's analysis of Wright's life draws compelling connections between Wright's problematic personal relations with black women in general and his mother in particular.
22. Stone continues, "and to every one of y'all behind bars, you know that Angie loves ya" . . . "whenever you're facin' doubt / brothas gonna work it out. I love you."

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